

## **Statement on the death penalty by Most Reverend Blase Cupich, Bishop of Rapid City and Most Reverend Paul J. Swain, Bishop of Sioux Falls**

Elijah Page is expected to be executed by the State of South Dakota the week of July 9, 2007, the first execution in our state in nearly sixty years. He and his accomplices have been convicted of the brutal beating, torture and slaying of Chester Poage. In addition to taking an innocent human life, they have inflicted a great deal of suffering and pain on Chester Poage's family and friends that will last a lifetime. The hearts of all South Dakotans grieve with those who loved this young man and share their outrage at this unspeakable crime. We pray that healing may come to them.

Clearly, the state has an obligation both to hold violent criminals accountable for their actions and to protect society from those who are a threat. We sincerely appreciate the burden our elected officials bear as they struggle to exercise their responsibilities in good conscience and according to law. The execution of Elijah Page ought to concern us all, however, for it is an act of violence in which we, through our representative form of government, participate.

The fact that South Dakotans have not put anyone to death for a criminal offense in nearly 60 years makes this scheduled execution all the more significant. At the same time, it forces us to confront serious questions about the kind of state we want to be. For this reason, we, the Bishops of the two Catholic Dioceses within the State of South Dakota, issue this brief statement.

The state-sponsored death of any man or woman does a disservice to those people who have vigorously defended the dignity of human life against the many threats in our time. Likewise, it only adds to the cycle of violence which continues to erode respect for human life. In addition, it terminates the possibility for conversion and rehabilitation, for which the state has an obligation to allow every opportunity.

Pope John Paul II, a man respected by people of all faiths and of no faith, understood that the preeminent moral challenge facing our time is the defense of the sacredness and value of human life. For this reason, he resolutely called for the abolition of capital punishment, arguing that when the protection of others is not an issue, the use of the death penalty cannot be morally defended. Undoubtedly the safety of society, which includes prison personnel and other inmates, is a grave obligation on the part of the state. However, with the steady improvement in the organization of the penal system, threats to society and the prison population by convicted criminals are as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes, "very rare, if not practically non-existent" (2267).

But even if such circumstances were to arise, the first response should be to promote, as much as humanly possible, prison reform that makes appropriate provision to protect all from danger, rather than to justify taking the life of any person. Thus, if there are weaknesses in the penal environment or legal system in South Dakota, such that our prisons are not safe and are a venue for more crime, then they ought to be alleviated. This could be done by drawing on the experiences of other states which house dangerous criminals without resorting to the death penalty, including our neighboring states of Iowa, North Dakota and Minnesota.

We should not attempt to teach that killing is wrong by state-sanctioned killing. This is precisely the moment for us as a state and for our leaders to affirm that those who commit horrific crimes will be held accountable for their actions, but in a way that teaches the sacredness of all persons gifted by God with life. This is a message we desperately need in our time, as this brutal murder so painfully reminds us. We have had enough violence in our society. The death penalty only adds more.

We invite South Dakotans to prayerfully reflect on the implications of the use of the death penalty by our state and its impact on our society not just in this difficult case, but in all such cases. We, citizens and leaders alike, must continue to work to assure that justice is sure without state-sanctioned violence. We must also continue to work to assure that the sacredness of all human life is protected and promoted by all.

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